

Where We Left Off by Iris Violetta

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Romance

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., Mike W.

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2018-01-10 15:32:05

Updated: 2018-01-15 20:50:23

Packaged: 2019-12-17 00:18:46

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 2,140

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: It's been six and a half years since El disappeared and Mike thought he'd finally moved past it. But now she's back and he's realizing just how messed up he is. History is repeating itself but it's not the same. (sequel to The Sad Mike Chronicles, canon only through season 1)

1. Chapter 1

Rain pounds on the roof of the car, loud against the silence inside. Mike sits in the driver's seat, his body still while his mind races. He's thought about this moment for so long, first planning on it and then simply holding onto the hope of it. But now it's here and happening so quickly that he's having trouble keeping up. One minute he was dodging a falling tree, the next he was calling her name. Her answer was haunting ("You can see me?") but he didn't have a chance to say anything else. Thunder boomed and he lead her to the car.

He isn't sure what to do. Should he bring her to the Byers'? Should he try to find the chief? He looks over to find Eleven staring at him. Her eyes are wide, and he wonders if she's just as confused as him.

"Hi," he softly says.

"Hi," she replies, and her voice sounds hoarse but older than it once was. That makes sense, he supposes, mentally smacking himself. Glancing down, he's reminded of her strange attire - an oversized coat and possibly nothing else. He winces when he looks at her bare feet. Should he have made her run in the woods without shoes? Should he have picked her up?

Rain drips from her hair and he knows he has to make a decision. He lets instinct take over, the same instinct he had seven years ago. He'll sneak her home.

He isn't surprised at how easy it is to slip up to his room, El in tow, without anyone noticing. His dad is snoring away in his chair and his mom and Holly are in the basement with flashlights, trying to make the best of the power outage from the storm. He hands El a towel and dry clothes, and politely waits outside the door while she changes. His hands shake.

When he reenters the room, she's standing by the closet, dressed in his sweats. It's deja vu and he feels like crying. He realizes that besides grabbing her wrist earlier to pull her to his car, he hasn't touched her. And he feels a sudden need to, to know that she's solid and real. Not a ghost. Not a dream.

Overwhelmed by the moment, his eyes roaming her face, her hair (her hair!), he takes the two steps forward and pulls her into a tight hug. She flinches, but then grabs back fiercely, curling her fingers into his shirt. He leans his head onto her shoulder, holding her close, whispering, "I missed you. I missed you so much." Wishing he were more eloquent, wishing he could express or even understand all the feelings he's had for the past seven years. She nods over and over and he can feel tears on his neck. Her skin is icy and there's a faint moldy smell in her hair, but he could stay here forever.

Minutes pass and eventually El yawns against his shoulder. Mike gently disengages and points to the beds.

"Here, you can sleep on top. I'll be right below you. And tomorrow, when my family is gone, you can take a shower and I'll look through Nancy's clothes for you."

El easily clambers up the ladder and soon she's enveloped in soft pillows and a heavy warm comforter. Mike stands by the head of the bed, leaning his chin on the rail. He can just make out a shine in her eyes in the dim light.

"Are you okay?"

She opens her mouth but closes it again, clearly rethinking what to say. Finally she whispers, "It's warm. I haven't...been warm."

Mike doesn't push for more information, although he wonders - has it been weeks since she was last warm? Months? Has she been cold this entire time? He swallows hard before climbing into his own bed.

"Good night, El."

"Good night, Mike."

He can't see her but he feels her presence, hears her breathing. He knows he should feel relieved but somehow he's more tense than ever. When her breaths become slow and heavy, he finally lets himself cry.

2. Chapter 2

When Eleven wakes up, it's still dark. She's not used to sleeping more than a few hours at a time. It's not the first time she's slept in this bed - at least in the Upside Down. She's tried most of the beds in the Wheeler house, along with the couches and the recliner. They're all better than the forest floor or tied to a high branch, but she always had to keep moving. The creatures there weren't the smartest, as long as she stayed a few steps ahead.

She tried. She tried so hard to come back. She just wasn't strong enough. The most she could do was thin the partition between worlds until she could walk between them like a ghost. She lost track of how many times she'd sat beside Mike in his classrooms, how many times she'd curled up beside him on the couch. And sometimes he would almost see her, but he never did. It hurt a little more each time. She could tell it hurt him too.

Holly, though - Holly could see her. She found El huddled in the corner of her bedroom one day early on and El couldn't believe it. This tiny thing, looking into her eyes and talking to her.

"Hi. You're pretty."

If El was in the house, Holly always knew how to find her. They'd sit in the blanket fort - always set up, always there - or in Holly's room. El never told her her name and Holly always called her "friend." It felt nice to be seen. It felt nice to exist. Then came the day that Holly looked through her and said nothing. And then El was all alone again.

The days ran together, into weeks and months and years. It was still cold and damp, but it became a sort of home. And she became dependent on watching the other side. Sometimes she'd follow Mike around, to school and back in the basement. Other times she'd wander and visit the other boys and the townspeople. She clung onto that week in '83 for so long, but eventually her memories warped. She had trouble keeping track of what had happened then and what she had seen later on. As she watched Mike's cheekbones sharpen, as the childish timbre of his voice deepened, as he became gangly and

unsure and then grew into himself, she forgot what he had looked like as a boy. Hadn't he always looked this way? Hadn't she always craned her neck to see his eyes?

(But there were some things she wouldn't ever forget: the way his hands had clung to hers while she lay atop the science table, the warmth of his mouth touching hers. Those were the things she couldn't recreate.)

The last year had been the hardest. Mike and the other boys disappeared, and it took a while (several overheard phone calls) to figure out that they had left for school. She felt alone again, and wondered if this was perhaps her new life.

Sometimes she wondered if she'd dreamt the whole thing up. Another lifetime ago.

Then suddenly he was back. She could feel it inside and tracked him to Castle Byers. She didn't know where the storm came from, but she knew it was her only chance as she clawed her way through the trunk. Even in the wind and rain, it was warmer here than in the Upside Down. And he was there. He was there.

He was looking right at her. Not through her, not doubting himself.

"Eleven?"

She shivers even now thinking about it. When the first rays creep between the blinds, she hangs over the rail and studies Mike in his sleep. She concentrates on his soft snores and the splatter of freckles across his cheeks, instead of the fears that are starting to grow in the back of her mind. The birds start their morning songs and Mike's family moves about the house to start their days. She stays silent; she's always been good at hiding.

Mike wakes up to see El peeking from the top bunk, hair tumbling to the comforter, lit from behind. His smile is unlike anything she saw while watching him all those years.

"Hi."

"Hi."

3. Chapter 3

In the daylight Mike gets a better look at Eleven. Her arms look lean but toned. She's so pale, practically white, blue veins glowing underneath her skin. He can see faint scars on her arms and neck and and he tries not to guess how many are hiding on the rest of her body. Her nails are bitten down to the skin. He can't get over her hair - long and in desperate need of detangling. But her eyes are as brown as ever.

He keeps staring at her and she wonders if he had still pictured her as the little girl. She isn't even sure what she looks like anymore, besides knowing that her hair has grown (everywhere) and the soles of her feet have toughened. In the hallway, she sees the same mirror and stands in front of it just like she had before. Who is this girl? When she meets Mike's eyes in the reflection, she can tell he doesn't know either. But he quickly throws a smile on his face and hands her a towel before pointing out the bathroom.

The shower is clean and the water is warm and the steam curls in the air. She's never felt so clean. Meanwhile, Mike digs around Nancy's closet for some appropriate summer clothing. He tries to find her different options, realizing that her taste might not be the same. And that's the root of the pain, a tightening in his chest. She's different than before and he's not sure how he feels about it. It hurts that she's changed without him. But what did he expect?

Stop being stupid, he thinks to himself. Besides, they've barely talked since yesterday - he's probably jumping to conclusions.

El's just happy to have proper clothes. She outgrew the pink dress and shoes ages ago. All that was left was the coat, which would always dwarf her. She'd found it in the box, but after a while nothing appeared in the box anymore.

Mike leads her downstairs and points out how the new TV is larger but the recliner hasn't changed. It's like a strange dance, repeating the same moves. When she gravitates to the photos on the mantel, updated within the past year, he chuckles.

"I bet you hardly recognize us, huh?"

She smiles in response. She's not sure how to tell him that she knows his face now better than when he was a boy. That face lives in blurry memories.

Mike's eyes widen. "You're probably starving. Oh! Oh my god! You're gonna be so excited."

He races to the kitchen and when she reaches him, he's holding a box of Eggo's. El practically squeals in excitement and jumps onto the counter as he places two in the toaster.

"I figured you missed these. What - what did you eat when you were there?"

"Whatever I could find. Plants and..." she trails off with a shrug, keeping her eyes on the toaster. She's too embarrassed to continue. Luckily they're interrupted by the waffles popping up. They each snatch one up and Mike touches his waffle to hers.

"Cheers!"

El doesn't get it but doesn't care because she's finally, finally, *finally* having an Eggo and - wait, is this really what they taste like? It's definitely better than anything she's eaten in the past several years, but...she was expecting more. She's built them up so much in her mind that she's somewhat disappointed now. But Mike is watching her with anticipation, so she fakes a smile and scarfs down the rest. She doesn't want to let him down; somehow she knows this is important to him.

He grins back before turning serious. His voice is quiet, tentative.

"We looked for you, you know. *I* looked for you. I never gave up."

Her heart clenches. She knows that's not true.

"One time, years ago, we were all having a sleepover at Will's and I saw something weird in the backyard. And I *swore* it was you. I made the guys stay out there with me to wait for you. I ended up sleeping in the grass that night."

"I know."

"What?"

"I was there." She'd slept right next to him, thankful that no creatures bothered her that night.

He wrinkles his brow. "You - you saw me?"

Biting her lip, she whispers, "I could always see you."

She watches as betrayal washes over his face and she knows this won't be good. She knew this would happen.